

alongside

5 Questions Districts Ask to Improve Student Support Services

A practical guide to strengthen school
support with limited resources and staff

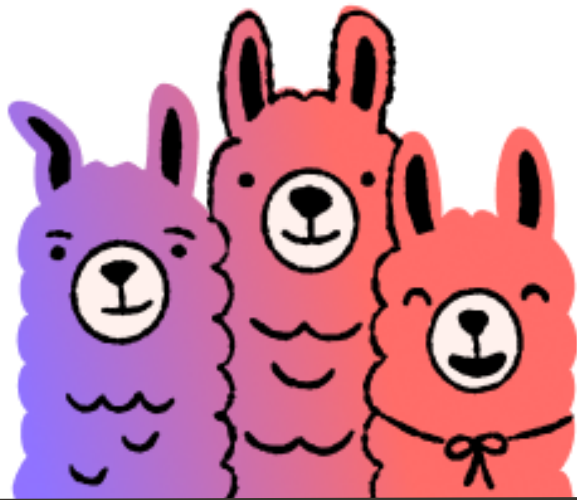


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Setting the Stage

Schools struggle to support students in the face of budget cuts, staff burn-out and high turnover rates.

Today's educators face formidable challenges in supporting student wellness. Students are reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression more often, and districts struggle to hire specialists to address students' needs.

Struggling to Meet Needs

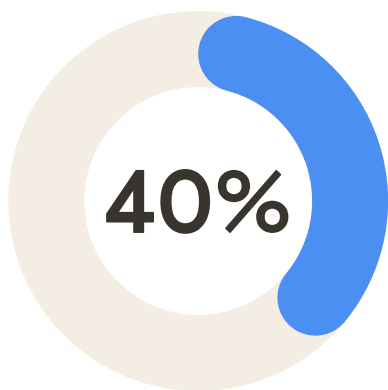
Nearly 8 million students have no access to a school counselor, and 3 million lack access to any school-based mental health staff, including psychologists and social workers.

School counselors experience high burnout and turnover rates, often leaving after fewer than two years due to burnout, excessive caseloads, and non-counseling duties

464:1

The national student-to-counselor ratio is still hovering around 464:1, far above the recommended 250:1.

Things are getting worse, not better



schools struggling to fill student support roles

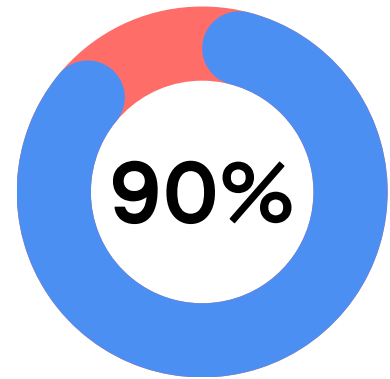
Meanwhile, 69% of public schools reported an increase in students seeking mental health services from their school. (NCES). Although schools have experienced an increased need for school psychologists, counselors, and social workers for decades, the gap in supply continues to widen.

Forty percent of public schools indicated it was either very difficult or difficult to fill “mental health professional” roles. (American School Counselor Association)

Because of the mismatch between student needs and staffing availability, fewer than half of students who need mental health support receive it.

Schools play a critical role in providing mental health and wellness support to teens. Research reveals at least 50% of youth with treatable mental health conditions do not receive adequate treatment, and many go undetected.

Of students who do receive support, 90% receive it in school-based settings, and only 10% exclusively rely on general medical providers. (SAMHSA)



percent of student support provided by schools vs. outside providers

Evaluating New Ways to Help More Students

Given the significant gap between student needs and available human resources, the most realistic way for school systems to scale their support services is through a careful assessment of current approaches and willingness to innovate. This guide provides leaders with 5 essential questions to consider as they complete this assessment, while introducing a new approach that leverages tech to provide all students with Tier 1 coaching support and to help identify more severe issues before they escalate.

5 Essential Questions



1. How do you identify students who are suffering in silence?
2. How are your students developing resilience through executive function and pro-social skill building?
3. How are you making personalized Tier 1 coaching available to all students?
4. How are you allocating time for students with Tier 2 and 3 needs?
5. How can you reduce the time that students who need support spend outside of the classroom?

#1 How do you identify students who are suffering in silence?

Schools can't help students they don't know are suffering. Thus, the first step usually involves the identification of students in need.

Some common approaches include:

- 📍 Universal screeners
- Informal check-ins
- Digital mental health support platforms



Evaluating the Pros and Cons of each of these can help you identify whether you are using the most efficient and effective approach in your district.

Universal Screeners

Schools opt for structured, scheduled universal mental health screenings using a variety of available screeners.

Pros

- When carried out carefully with validated tools, formal mental health screenings help identify early student risk and inform a systematic, proactive approach to adopting services and supports.
- Within an MTSS framework, screenings form the baseline for comprehensive school-based health systems at the universal ("Tier 1") level of service.
- Mental health screening data also help educators monitor student strengths and needs over time—individually and in groups.

Cons

- Because screeners are administered to students infrequently, typically once or twice a year, they fail to capture day-to-day or seasonal changes students experience.
- Students may self-report data that is less than forthcoming due to embarrassment, fear, or to avoid any follow-up.



Universal screeners provide a starting point, but do not capture reliable information for all students.

Informal Check-Ins

Some districts simply ask teachers to verbally check in with their students at the beginning of class about how they're feeling.

How do you identify students who are suffering in silence?

- Universal screeners
- 📍 Informal check-ins
- Digital support platforms

Pros

- Teachers can read verbal and non-verbal cues to recognize which students need a referral to a counselor.
- Check-ins allow teachers to build a classroom climate of caring in which students feel safe and are more likely to voice their concerns to their teachers and peers.

Cons

- Secondary students bounce around different classes, so it is challenging to implement a consistent check-in program.
- Some students want to keep their feelings private for the same reasons they are not forthcoming on screeners.
- Since informal check-ins aren't recorded, schools can't accurately assess individual or schoolwide trends using this technique alone.



Check-ins allow teachers to build a classroom climate of caring.

Digital Wellness Support Platforms

Reluctant students will share information when they get an immediate benefit for doing so. With a digital tool that provides clinician-grade interventions, students can access instant and relevant support.

How do you identify students who are suffering in silence?

- Universal screeners
- Informal check-ins
- 📍 Digital support platforms

Pros

- By allowing students to address their concerns privately, silent students can experience some relief without visiting a counselor.
- Serious issues trigger notifications to the school team so they can take appropriate steps.
- Students can communicate in their native language, removing some barriers that are harder to overcome with screeners or informal check-ins.

Cons

- Many general-purpose wellness and mental health apps are on the market, but their quality and clinical rigor vary widely.
- To avoid having students seek out their own—potentially counterproductive—solution, school leaders should partner with a provider offering an evidence-based digital tool explicitly built for district adoption.



"She saw me... but later that day made a suicidal outcry in the app."

—Anne Lantey, School Counselor

#2 How are your students developing resilience through EF and pro-social skill building?

School-based executive function and pro-social skill building activities help teens learn how to set goals and priorities, make responsible decisions, manage stress, address conflict, and build positive relationships. When students lack the skills to manage their emotions and make good decisions, they often experience difficulty in school.

Some common approaches include:

- 📍 Standardized SEL Curriculum
- Responsive student-driven resources



A closer evaluation of traditional and newer approaches to pro-active skill building solutions may inspire opportunities to increase student outcomes while simultaneously reducing the constraints of limited instructional time and overburdened teachers.

Standardized SEL Curriculum

Schools typically approach mental health education through school-wide curricula that teach explicit social and emotional skills or in groups run by the guidance department.

Pros

- Social-emotional learning (SEL) research demonstrates that students overwhelmed by stress, trauma, fear and loneliness are more likely to struggle in school and in life.
- Schoolwide SEL curricula teach students to regulate emotions and behaviors by covering the topics of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Cons

- When taught as a curriculum, older students often approach SEL with apathy and then forget the lessons when a real issue arises.
- Finding class time to implement SEL has proven challenging, particularly for teachers at the secondary level.
- Standardized SEL curriculum lacks responsiveness to each student's lived experience and individual needs.

Responsive Student-Driven Resources

While teens often find standardized SEL to be unrelatable, they actively seek content related to their overall wellbeing and resilience. They try apps, search TikTok videos, and advocate for mental health resources. By providing a trusted resource, schools can help teens understand the value of using a clinician-designed tool vs. non-vetted sources.

How are your students developing resilience through executive function and pro-social skill building?

- Standardized SEL
- 📍 Responsive resources



"We've really struggled to find an SEL program that high school students appreciate..."

-Dr. Natasha Scott,
Director of Student Services

Pros

Many teens already turn to apps for questions they have about mental health and wellness. The function of a digital tool isn't to replace human support, but to provide a personalized filter as teens seek out information on topics such as:

- managing conflicts
- eating disorders
- toxic social media
- healthy sleep habits
- balancing school and extracurriculars

Cons

- Some digital tools lean too far into trendy design gimmicks at the expense of providing meaningful and practical support. At times, this results in surface-level interventions that are less rigorous.
- Before introducing a digital solution in your school, ensure it is research-based, clinician-designed, and made for adolescents.

#3 How are you making personalized Tier 1 support available to all?

Research shows that when we're able to help students manage their mental wellbeing earlier, those concerns are less likely to escalate. Of course, counselors know this, which is why they have conversations in the hallways, before school, and between appointments to point students in a better direction in a short period of time.

These "brief interventions" have a clinical underpinning. The evidence-based SBIRT model uses brief interventions after screening and before referral to treatment, leveraging quick interactions to help patients.

Some approaches include:

- 📍 Staff-led interventions
- AI-enabled personalized support

District leaders can choose to apply a staff-reliant approach and/or integrate digital tools for a more scalable solution.

Staff-Led Interventions

Tailored, staff-based interventions provide educational and psychosocial support for at-risk youth, addressing issues such as academic underachievement and its impact on mental wellbeing.



Pros

Schools can reach students before they need more intensive services by introducing pro-social activities to all students, regardless of their risk.

Benefits include:

- Picking up non-verbal cues (body language, facial expressions)
- Creating an empathetic and understanding environment
- Holding more nuanced conversations

Cons

Due to typical student to counselor ratios of over 400:1, school staff cannot reach all students who would benefit from brief interventions, especially when over 40% of teens feel persistently sad and hopeless.

464:1
students:counselors

Tech-Enabled Personalized Support

Effective Tier 1 coaching doesn't have to include a live counselor—often, students benefit from a brief self-guided check-in or resource to help them regulate their emotions or process a challenge.

Alongside is a new type of solution that uses research-based technology to deliver personalized coaching at scale with clinician-created support for dozens of topics including:

- Interpersonal relationships (friends, family, peers, and social media interactions)
- School (schoolwork, grades, and feeling safe at school)
- Health (sleep, physical health, and managing panic attacks)
- Self-worth and identity (body image, gender identity, discrimination, etc.)
- Severe issues (substance abuse, trauma, and self-harm) > escalated to school teams per safety protocols

Pros

- Students confidentially log in to access personalized AI chat activities that guide them to resources related to their concerns.
- With more than 90% of teens rating their chat sessions as “helpful,” this approach frees up counselors’ time to focus on the more urgent needs that only a human professional can address.
- Students also build self-management and self-regulation skills that provide long-term benefits.

How are you making preventative mental health care available to all?

- Staff-led interventions
- 📍 Tech-enabled preventative care



Cons

- By removing the human from the equation, some parents or educators worry that high-risk students may slip through the cracks.
- Digital solutions that lack automated triaging or high-risk detection systems require additional staffing to monitor which students need more support.

#4 How are you allocating time for students with Tier 2 and 3 needs?

Schools that serve marginalized students often lack the resources to ensure students have access to high-quality counseling. Research shows that at least 10 to 15% of students will need Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions that require human involvement—a need often left unmet due to overwhelmed staff. A school’s mental health team must reserve resources for those students while supporting lower-risk students.

Key considerations include:

- 📍 Optimize your mix of services for higher risk students
- Empower lower risk students to access more help on their own

Strategies for Tier 2 and 3 Students

Mental health treatment, or Tier 3 services, aim to help students with intense needs, those who are already experiencing significant distress and impaired functioning. School-based mental health providers typically provide Tier 3 services to students with diagnosed social, emotional, and/or behavioral needs in the following ways:

- Individual therapy
- Group therapy
- Family therapy

Mental health early interventions, or Tier 2 services, support students who have been identified as “experiencing mild distress, mildly impaired functioning or as at-risk for a given problem or concern.” These services can include:

- Small group work with students who have the same needs
- Brief, one-on-one interventions that focus on problem-solving or motivation
- Classroom supports such as a daily report card or teacher check-in



Empowering Lower Risk Students

While Tier 1 services aren't as intensive as Tier 2 or 3 supports, schools still need to invest in Tier 1 services to foster well-being for all students. Self-guided Tier 1 supports can empower students and free up staff time for more urgent needs.

For example, individuals who benefit most from self-guided Tier 1 support might otherwise seek out a school counselor several times a week for minor issues. Often, these students benefit from mindful breathing exercises, encouragement from peers who've handled similar problems, or a space to vent.

How are you allocating time for students with Tier 2 and 3 needs?

- Optimize services for Tier 2/3
- 📍 Empower lower risk students



“Once (frequent flyers) started using the app, they were able to handle some of the situations on their own.”

-Tracey Bennett, School Counselor

With a digital solution, a counselor or classroom teacher can remind students to check in on the app and work through a customized module to get back on track. Ideally, they're able to self-regulate and return to classwork quickly without requiring significant oversight from time-constrained school staff.

Clinically designed digital tools can supplement school mental health programs by promoting resilience and well-being at scale.



#5 How can you reduce the time that students who need support spend outside of the classroom?

With limited student support staff and tight budgets, schools can tap into classroom management resources to deliver brief and early interventions to all students, keeping students in class and out of the counselor's office.



Approaches to consider:

Proactive Strategies

Students benefit when schools promote well-being and social-emotional health, regardless of whether or not kids are at risk.

Examples include:

- Assessment tools to gauge student wellness and school climate
- Positive reinforcement systems
- Informal teacher “check-ins”

Reactive Strategies

Instead of sending dis-regulated students to see a counselor, schools can use classroom-based strategies to guide them to a more positive mindset.

Examples include:

- A “calm corner” to self-regulate
- “Brain break” activities
- Tech tools to help students work through challenges

Teachers' lack of mental health expertise can lead to unnecessary trips to the counselor and missed class time, while evidence-based tools can help teachers and counselors work together to address student needs more effectively.



“This app is teaching them how to self advocate...and reduces the amount of time that they're coming out of class.”

—Dr. Violet Martin,
Director of Special Services

Conclusion

As schools confront the dual challenges of increased student needs and limited resources, embracing innovative approaches is crucial.

As this report has outlined, the gap between student needs and available staff and funding to support them is growing wider than ever.

By carefully evaluating strategies in key areas, schools can maximize their ability to support students without necessarily adding staff. New technologies, like digital school wellness platforms, offer ways to scale support and reach more students.

Key Areas to Assess & Optimize

1. Identifying students suffering in silence
2. Building resilience through executive function and social skill development
3. Providing personalized Tier 1 coaching to all students
4. Allocating resources for higher-need students
5. Minimizing time students spend out of class for support

No Burden. No Barriers. Just Better Outcomes.

Alongside is a tool that exemplifies how technology can augment school support services by providing personalized coaching via clinician-developed AI chat activities.

Alongside helps schools improve school attendance, reduce disciplinary referrals and lower rates of staff turnover through an easy to implement, low-cost solution.

By combining thoughtful assessment of current practices with strategic adoption of new tools, schools can significantly expand their capacity to support students' emotional wellbeing and academic success.



About Alongside

How it works:

- Students log into Alongside with their school email and can chat, track their mood, journal or explore resources
- A student can chat about any topic and is matched with a relevant and personalized clinician-developed exercise
- Students set a small goal in the chat that focuses on taking one small step in real life to increase hope and self-efficacy, a key component of resilience
- Students can share their chat summary with their school counselor, and connect to school or community resources.
- Students receive encouraging reminders to reinforce following through on goals



Learn more at www.alongside.care

Founded in 2022, Alongside is a research-backed wellness platform for K-12 schools that provides personalized coaching for students and educators, resulting in better attendance, behavior, culture, and climate outcomes. Available 24/7 in 35+ languages, Alongside also offers accurate crisis detection and safety protocols for severe issues, universal screening, and direct on-ramps to human support. Alongside is a Tier 1 solution that reaches all students and provides confidential, evidence-based skill-building for everyday challenges with no extra staff, training, or resources required. The founders of Alongside previously founded Actively Learn, a K-12 digital curriculum company which was acquired by McGraw Hill in 2021.